

"I've been praying a lot for the 20 victims of the Arizona shootings, for the families of the six who died and for the many more who were wounded. One of those casualties, a woman shot in the head at point blank range, is my colleague in Congress, Gabrielle Giffords. She was the object of the murderer in the frightening series of events that unfolded on January 8th in Tucson, Arizona.

I know Rep. Giffords through our service in the House of Representatives together, and I know exactly what kind of event she was holding on the corner Saturday morning when an attacker assailed her and the people who had come out to speak with her. One of her constituents was a nine-year-old girl who wanted to talk to her congresswoman about her interest in government. Instead, she got a lesson in cruelty from the gunman who savagely took her life.

The sad facts of this horrific story are enough to remind us that our democracy, our free speech, and our open society are vulnerable to criminal acts of violence. This was not just an attack on innocent people, not just an attack on a member of Congress and her constituents, it was also an attack on the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly that characterize our great nation.

Americans have a right to assemble freely, especially when they are doing so for the purpose of exchanging ideas with their elected officials. Nothing is more important to the work of our members of Congress than the ability for us to communicate with the people we are charged with representing. And while this incident makes every American pause, none of us should be deterred from the important task of debating the important issues that face our country.

For my part, the public events I hold in Southern Missouri will remain unchanged. I will still meet in open spaces with the people living and working in our district, at small businesses, at schools, at Chamber meetings and in seniors' centers. My staff will still be in communities throughout our congressional district each month, asking for the feedback of concerned citizens and offering assistance to anyone who needs help dealing with a federal agency.

Yet, like it or not, we are now engaged in a debate about how the political tone in our country affects Americans. And I think civility - a civil tone, civil disagreement - is essential. I think we should insist on it. The way we treat one another matters deeply to our democracy, and it influences how politics is reported on in the media.

I love disagreement - it's a chance to learn. I love debate - it's an opportunity to test our beliefs. I love the institution of Congress - it's meant to be close to the people. But I do not love finger-pointing or disrespect or the abusiveness that characterizes some people's approaches to politics. The most telling quote on this subject in the last week came from the CEO of Fox News, Roger Ailes, "This goes on... both sides are wrong, but they both do it."

If we are going to truly change the course of our country, we are also going to have to get rid of the discord which prevents us from having constructive conversations about our future. We can believe deeply in our political convictions - I believe deeply in mine - but we cannot allow

intolerance or violence to undermine the cherished freedoms endowed upon us by our Creator and our Constitution."